



Perceptions on collaboration, time management and meaningfulness

Millennials' innovations in the subject teacher education programme

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This chapter presents the highlights of current student teachers' perceptions of the subject teacher education programme (STEP). The study takes inspiration from the 'weak signals' sent by recent student teacher cohorts, which have begun to question the traditions of teacher education more intensely than ever before. Here and elsewhere (e.g. Boggs & Szabo 2011), many teacher educators have considered student teachers' ideas for developing the STEP to be an embarrassing and unexpected state of affairs. However, we argue that student teachers represent one of the key groups that must be heard

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in order to maintain the efficiency of teacher education when facing 21st century challenges.

By seeking new ways to listen to and understand these teachers' voices, teacher educators can diminish misunderstandings based on intuitive and tacit generational differences. Consequently, this chapter aims to deepen the understanding of student teachers' perceptions of teacher education, particularly in regards to STEP, through the lens of generation theories (Edmunds & Turner 2005; Kupperschmidt 2000; Mannheim 1952; Strauss & Howe 1991).

While the literature often discusses generational differences, researchers have carried out relatively little empirical research in the educational sciences. The literature is particularly scarce when it comes to integrating the perspectives of today's student teachers. Also notable is the fact that most research on generational differences has been conducted in the US. For example, Boggs and Szabo (2011) approached the phenomenon normatively by developing coursework activities as a means to help pre-service primary teachers examine and understand their work habits, attitudes and beliefs from a generational perspective. This approach also aimed to help the student teachers work amiably with in-service teachers during the student-teaching experience.

Bontempo (2010) explored the needs of Millennials (Howe & Strauss 2000) in K–12 school settings by identifying the factors that motivate them to remain in teaching jobs. The study was inspired by the fact that half of all teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Rodriguez and Hallman (2013) explored the ways in which the millennial themes of globalization and shape shifting were present in prospective teachers' learner biographies.

This chapter contributes to the literature about Millennials, also known as 'Generation Y' (Hurst & Good 2007). Most of today's student teachers were born after 1980 and are therefore characterized as members of the Millennial generation. In the following sections, we start by briefly depicting the context and procedures of the study.

We continue by introducing the main ideas of generation theory, paving the way for an understanding of the subsequent sections where we present the highlights of the student teachers' perceptions. Accordingly, we discuss these perceptions in tandem with generation theory and previous findings about Millennials in the context of Finnish pre-service teacher education.

Brief introduction to the study of student teachers' perceptions

Context

The study (Mäkinen, Lindén, Annala & Wiseman, 2018) introduced in this chapter was conducted in the STEP (2014). The STEP is provided by the University of Tampere in cooperation with the School of Education (SE), Teacher Training School (TTS) and Disciplinary Faculties (DF). The STEP primarily aims to educate teachers specializing in particular subjects for secondary and both general and vocational upper secondary schools. The programme is intended to be congruent with the OECD model (OECD 2005) in which disciplinary subjects are studied alongside educational theories and teaching practice. In addition, the STEP curriculum follows the European Teacher Education Curricula (European Commission 2007), consisting of general pedagogy, practice in schools and subject didactics.

The staff members who teach in the programme are general educationalists, teacher educators and supervising teachers. Focused on the didactics of one or more school subjects, the teacher educators differ from general educationalists (cf. Tryggvason 2012). Supervising teachers supervise the teaching practices, which are performed at the TTS. The STEP is implemented in disciplinary groups in accordance with school subject areas: mathematics and science, languages and

social sciences. Accordingly, the teacher qualification requires a master's degree in the DF for the students' majors.

Procedure

Method. The study utilized an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), which is based on Heidegger's (1927/1962) and Gadamer's (1960/1975) philosophical worldviews, and on the concept that people create meaning from life experiences, and their perspectives emerge as they relate to particular times and places. In accordance with IPA, we derived the interpretations from the respondents' shared life experiences and relationships with their peers, teacher educators, and and supervising teachers.

Respondents and data. The study was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews by recruiting a small group of volunteers (10 females and 3 males) who represented each disciplinary group. By limiting the focus to this small group of volunteers, we were able to hone in on a nuanced view of their individual realities. All of the respondents were born in the 1980s. At the time of the interviews, the respondents' ages ranged from 25–32 years, so they formed a small generation unit (cf. Mannheim 1952) regarding their life experience. The interview process comprised topics concerning each respondent's experiences while studying in the STEP; the challenges and resources each student was required to manage depending on their personal situation. Giving the interviewees freedom to answer any way they chose was beneficial because they felt comfortable enough to identify the issues relevant to them.

Ethics. Our ethical responsibility to the respondents was also a serious consideration in how the data were collected, treated and interpreted. The email contacts and interviews were conducted by two research assistants who were not familiar with the STEP or with the student teachers being interviewed. Through continuous collective reflections and researcher triangulation, we ensured that no one

imposed their own expectations when analysing and interpreting the data. To mitigate the potential of our own assumptions affecting the results, we used bracketing in accordance with Munhall (1994).

Analysis. The data were latent content analysed using an abductive research strategy first introduced by Peirce (1966). For the present purposes, abduction refers to the process of forming a plausible explanation of the phenomenon. The analysis consisted of four stages. In the first stage, the transcripts were examined thoroughly to gain an overall familiarity. In the next stage, the basic unit was identified as a view that an interviewee had adopted. These units were then broken into two types: units based on the interview topics and units that emerged through several readings of the transcripts. In the third stage, we mapped out the interviewees' patterns based on the units constructed in the preceding phase. Finally, we selected and classified the specific pertinent passages that resembled the characteristics of the Millennials suggested in earlier research.

Generation theories

Mannheim's (1952) views on generation lay a basis for examining how current student teachers fit in with the teacher education. Mannheim defined generation as a group of people born and raised in the same general chronological, social, and historical context. He emphasized that both the generational location and the formative experiences during youth are key determinants of a particular generation. Generational location refers to definite modes of behaviour, feelings, and thoughts, and formative experiences involve participation in the social and intellectual climate of their time and place (cf. Pilcher 1994).

Coupling of generation and cohort

It is important to note that Mannheim (1952) used generation to mean cohort, which refers to people within a delineated population who experience the same substantial events within a given period of time. In fact, Mannheim's definition is seminal because it considers both chronological and socio-historical approaches to defining cohorts. The chronological approach refers to a cohort born at a particular time that shares common transitions throughout the life-course, while the socio-historical approach defines generation as a cohort who shares a collective consciousness or memory (Edmunds & Turner 2005).

Moreover, Mannheim's theory considers the differences both between and within generations. Actual generations are formed by the collective experience of major events or traumas while generational units refer to groups within the same generation that cope with their experiences in different and specific ways (Edmunds & Turner 2005). This implies that there are sub-cultures that form through a smaller group of people with similar locations and experiences.

Mannheim's description has been supported and expanded by several researchers. For example, Kupperschmidt (2000) defines generation as a group of people who share birth years and experiences as they move through time together, influencing and being influenced by a variety of critical factors. The specific timespan of each generation has been estimated to cover approximately 20 to 25 years. In sum, the cohort theorists argue that growing up at about the same time and experiencing events at about the same point in one's development inevitably leads to similar values, opinions, and life experiences of people within each cohort (Edmunds & Turner 2005; Kupperschmidt 2000; Strauss & Howe 1991). Although different scholars use different dates, the majority of the literature agrees that the Millennial generation's birth years span the period from 1980 to 1999 (Kupperschmidt 2000).

The generational approach has also received critique. In sociological generation research, Donnison (2007) points out two major deficiencies. First, generation research has been limited to certain (Western) cultures. Second, the orientations, qualities and needs of Millennials are mostly examined from the institutional and cultural perspectives of previous generations. Donnison (2007) points out that in this case the interpretations may reflect more the previous generations' enculturation into the sociocultural context of the 1980s and 1990s than the generation which they try to describe. In psychological and educational research, the critique is often targeted at the analytic worth of the generation concept and its problematic models of explanation (e.g. Helsper & Enyon 2009). Admittedly, one of the biggest issues in researching generations is that the impacts of age, cultural period and generation are logically intertwined and, accordingly, it is extremely difficult to examine just one of those separately (Purhonen 2002). Moreover, in popular discussion the psychobabble stereotypes of Millennials dominate with no connection to research.

However, despite this critique, we believe that when used as a lens, generation is a potential concept in sociological research of education. It provides a framework to understand meanings of collective experiences and discourses by reflecting those with shared formative experiences. As Corsten (1999, 258) puts it, members of generation are not connected by common factors, but they are also linked to one another by the feeling of the fact that they are linked.

Millennials' formative experiences

Differences between generations are attributed to the powerful influences of the environment within the socialization years. These influences deeply impact the development of an individual's personality, values, and expectations (Macky et al. 2008). The experiences that reflect major shifts in the sociocultural environment,

such as highly salient events that one generation experiences, major changes in lifestyles, traumatic events, major socioeconomic events, and advancements in technology, are the most significant (Cennamo & Gardner 2008). Therefore, due to the history and the culture of the 1990s and the 2000s, the Millennial generation has distinct formal experiences. Edmunds and Turner (2005) argued that beginning in the 1970s, the generational cohorts should be considered global because “while generations and generational change have traditionally been understood in national terms, there are reasons to suppose that globally experienced traumatic events may facilitate the development of global generations” (Edmunds & Turner 2005, 564).

The early years of the Millennials can be characterized as being sheltered and insecure. The most significant globally frightening events in their early years were the threats of violence, terrorism, and natural disasters. These include severe school shootings in North America, Germany and Finland in the 1990s and 2000s; the September 11 terrorist attacks (2001) and other threats of terrorism; the Madrid train bombings (2004); the Norway attacks (2011); the sinking of the Baltic ferry Estonia (1994); the Asian tsunami (2004); and the environmental threats, especially regarding climate change.

Major political events were also important, such as the Cold War (1985–91), the break-up of East Europe in the early 1990s, and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1990). Also influential have been the socioeconomic global transitions, such as the rise of corporate multinational capitalism, share market collapses, sustained recessions, pervading unemployment rates, and loss of job security through the 1980s–1990s due to restructurings, privatizations and more recently offshoring (Macky et al. 2008). In Finland, the Millennials have experienced the influence of the overheating of the Finnish economy that finally turned the country into a severe recession the beginning of the 1990s by entailing a deep depression and a huge increase in the unemployment rate from 3 to 18 per cent. In 1995, Finland joined the European Union.

Despite the difficult circumstances, this age group has been referred to as “Gen Sunshine” and “Gen Me,” which reflect the societal influences during their formative years (Huntley 2006; Twenge 2006, 2009). The descriptions are related to a societal cultural shift in which parenthood became a choice. According to Twenge (2006), this generation experienced continuous praise and encouragement, which reinforced their strengths and the development of their self-esteem.

Similarly, Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) and Broadbridge et al. (2007) suggest that Millennials have been raised overall with dedication, approval, and affirmation. This positive disposition may contribute to valuing high achievement and a strong sense of fairness and equality. Concurrently, divorces and single parent families have become more frequent (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). In Finland, nearly a third of marriages (32%) resulted in divorce in 1980, but 45%–53% of marriages have ended in divorce since 1990 (Statistics Finland 2012). Furthermore, children are frequently exposed to drugs, violent video games, and sexually-charged advertising in every developed country.

Their formative years included a rapid evolution of information and communication technologies (Chelliah & Clarce 2011; Myers & Sadaghiani 2010). They were born in an era in which the Internet was established (in the early 1980s). Hence, they are labelled as techno savvy “Net Generation” (Tapscott 1998) and “Digital Natives” (Prensky 2001). Technology and online social networks are integral parts of Millennials’ social and personal life and identity construction (Macon & Artley 2009). However, although many studies have emphasized the role of technology in their life (Howe & Strauss 2000; Nimon 2007), researchers seem to disagree on whether or not the digital lifestyle and the use of technology are as powerful factors in identity construction as they are argued to be.

The STEP through the lens of Millennial student teachers

The study offered insights into the Millennial student teachers' expectations and preferences in the context of initial subject teacher education. The findings identified descriptors of the Millennials as idealistic, sociable, self-assured, reflective, and achievement-oriented student teachers. In this respect, the analysis raised similar features of Millennials' perceptions and outlooks of life as have previous studies conducted in the higher education context (e.g. Howe & Strauss 2000; Lichy 2013; Twenge 2009). However, these features may refer to youth of all generations, especially in Western welfare states. Nevertheless, although the data did not provide a solid basis for interpretations regarding demographic changes in the student teacher population, they offered the prospects' viewpoints that may positively inspire the development of the STEP instead of promoting the ever-increasing reference to the stereotypical students of today.

The findings raised three phenomenological themes, and each theme partially interpreted the perceptions of current student teachers concerning their STEP studies. The themes were their perceptions of a) collaboration, b) time management, and c) meaningfulness in terms of the STEP studies. Next, we will briefly discuss these themes along with the emerging meanings, which are examined along with the insights of recent research on generations.

Three perceptions of designing the STEP

Perceptions of collaboration. The interviews revealed that the student teachers' experiences were affected by the STEP as a social environment with interpersonal relationships. Therefore, they interpreted the schedule confusions and unclear expectations as examples of lack of collaboration. Moreover, they also reflected quite

sensitively on the reality of the relationships between student teachers and teacher educators. They did not hesitate to challenge authority or express negative feelings, as well as positive ones, about the ways they were treated.

In fact, they wanted to be considered as junior colleagues. These views concerning concrete actions and participation were consistent with current research on the Millennials' social consciousness and their desire for tangible collaboration (Myers & Sadaghiani 2010; Ng & Gosset 2013). They expected the STEP to prepare them for the multiple tasks that take place in participatory environments in school communities. They were appreciative when their ideas were acknowledged and desired to have their experience and enthusiasm taken seriously (cf. Wong & Wong 2007). In other words, the student teachers sought a balance between support and guidance, and autonomy and responsibility that would allow them to experiment and test their wings in multiple learning environments, which is illustrated in the following comment:

It would have been interesting if there could be, for example, one week when two of us could arrange the school practices as a whole with the supervising teacher, or something like that, but we have just the theoretical. Oh, I wish we could have had something like that. (13)

Hereby, their views were consistent with previous studies on Millennials. Broadbridge et al. (2007) noted that Millennials tend to desire recognition for their skills and talents, and that they respond enthusiastically to responsibility. Similarly, Ng and Gosset (2013) argued that the Millennials want to make a positive contribution to the community. The interviewees seemed to strongly believe that trust and responsibility are based on shared communication, fairness, and negotiation. However, contrary to expectation, collaboration in online environments was only briefly discussed as a matter of course, such as “being connected across computers” (3). Despite being

technologically savvy (e.g. Lichy 2013), the respondents' desires for open communication were the most significant.

Perceptions of time. The interview data indicated conflicting approaches to time between the respondents and the STEP. The themes of possessing, investing, wasting, and budgeting time were primary issues in the data. The student teachers tended to allocate time to their studies, work, families, hobbies, and other activities and to schedule their lives with high efficacy and flexibility. Their descriptions of time gave the impression of the group members as multitasking individuals who were experienced in organizing their lives with calendars, and liked to have control and ownership of time. They discussed the clock time as a resource requiring management. Accordingly, the respondents sought a time balance between the different activities in their lives.

Their time orientation is illustrative of Nowotny's (1994) theory, which distinguishes between the time of individuals and the time of systems. One prominent feature in the data was that the clock time was experienced as a resource possessed mainly by the system, which had the authority to demand the students to devote themselves to the STEP. The problem was when they could not participate in the other courses offered by the DF, because they were expected to allocate their time only to the STEP. This is exemplified in the following:

We have an obligation to be available from 8 am to 6 pm every day. This time consuming is stressful because these 35 ECTS, what we get from the STEP studies in this year, we can't get the study grant [guaranteed by the state for each student] [-] Can one require that student teachers don't have any other life than the STEP studies? (11)

Another salient feature of the data was that the demands of compulsory attendance and the expectation that duties be performed at specific times were in conflict with their understanding of educational ideals. They were eager to ask "what for" and "why" questions when instructed

to study or perform in some special way. They suggested that many things could be learned with fewer hours spent in the classroom or alternative formats and pointed out that the focus in learning should not be on the amounts of time spent engaged in different activities in certain physical places.

It seemed slightly contradictory that the respondents wanted more autonomy but, at the same time, expected clear guidelines about participation and structured schedules. This indicated that the students were seeking a participatory role in scheduling. Their thoughts were parallel to Adam's (1995) notions about clock time, which positions the timing and intensity of activities in socially and culturally constructed temporal frames, and thereby should be flexible and changeable. Therefore, time was a major source of negative feelings, and the interviewees interpreted time demands as a form of social control (cf. Lee & Liebenau 1999).

The respondents experienced the schedules as unpredictable because of idling during the days, but also because of unexpected arduous assignments. These affected the students' personal, social, and so-called 'proper time' (cf. Nowotny 1994). The discussions about proper time referred to, for example, difficulties in planning things with a friend. In some cases, however, the students desired to spend proper time focusing on study assignments and other tasks at their own pace in their own manner (cf. Nimon 2007). Therefore, the different life and time spheres of the Millennials were interwoven.

Perceptions of meaningfulness. The present data feature discussions regarding the respondents' experiences with the purpose and meaning of the studies in the STEP curriculum. The student teachers gave an impression of themselves as people looking for value in every context of their lives, including their studies. Thus, they expected the STEP to reveal the connections between their personal experiences, required tasks and real-life professional competencies.

They compared the teaching practices to their previous or ongoing school experiences in the field. Many of them were aware of their

own knowledge bases and based their judgments on their prior experiences, as in the following:

I have worked as a substitute and I know what a teacher's daily life is. I have experience working with colleagues and parents, and being in contact with various social welfare persons. I feel stupid when we don't get any true chance to try things concretely. The only thing we get is the experience of standing in front of the class and we learn how much preparation is needed to master all the contents and subjects. (11)

What I miss that the STEP could be organized throughout in such a way what is known about how students learn nowadays, not to learn the subject contents by heart. (3)

As the quotes reveal, 'pedagogical content knowledge' followed by Shulman (1987) was emphasized in teaching practice. That is to say, the student teachers were taught how to transform content knowledge into pedagogy by constructing learning experiences that organized the subject matter considering particular pedagogical practices. However, respondents struggled to interpret this information in light of uncertainty in learning, the heterogeneity of students and their own experiences. Similarly, as they were familiar with holistic and reflective thinking, they disagreed when teaching and learning were modelled or theorized without any real-world context.

Accordingly, the STEP teacher educators' abilities to demonstrate the exchange between theory and practice were observed, and their authority depended on actions rather than societal hierarchies or academic positions. Nevertheless, interviewees identified traits they admired in teachers or that they considered useful for instructional purposes. They recognized whether the educators 'practiced what they preached'.

The student teachers had ideas of what types of activities would be useful and how the expectations related to their future as professionals.

Their opinions exemplified what Twenge and Campbell (2008) referred to as a characteristic of overconfidence among the Millennials. However, the data did not indicate any particular signs of extremely high self-esteem; rather, respondents' dissatisfaction reflected their desires for more intrinsic than extrinsic rewards and their hopes of leading more purposeful and interesting professional lives (cf. Ng & Gosset 2013). Their meaningful learning experiences tended to focus on obtaining a balance between their contributions to the community and pursuing ways to form their professional identities.

In summary, student teachers expected their studies to offer meaning and usefulness in relation to important issues, which would prepare them for a teaching career. Their needs for significance were related to the notion of authenticity, which stems from the prerequisite for being true to oneself by critically reflecting on self, others, relationships, and contexts (cf. Kreber 2013; Taylor 1991). Previous studies indicate that the Millennials have high expectations to find fulfilment and meaning in their work (Twenge & Campbell 2008). In turn, the current findings give a somewhat contradictory picture of Millennials' needs for self-reliance, their external loci of control, and their desires to contribute to something they find worthwhile.

Discussion

According to the results, the respondents expressed shifting perceptions. For example, their shared focus was time management and work-life balance between personal time and the time required by the programme. Therefore, they desired a thoroughly structured programme that could provide flexible alternatives in developing teaching professionalism both individually and collectively. They appreciated that study options and instructions were clearly presented, but felt that their proficiency in self-awareness and self-monitoring as well as their desire to create a balance between personal and professional time should be respected.

Despite this ambivalent desire for flexibility and stability, the respondents shared a useful perspective that should be considered when creating a more student-centred learning environment. As Bennet and Marton (2010) noted, students are increasingly sharing their life experiences using social media. The negotiations of existence and identity are also increasingly taking place online, which is changing the dynamics of presence and attendance. Therefore, new ways of building up a life narrative are highly influential normative experiences for the Millennial generation. In this case, stable study programme structures in flexible environments may be an effective approach to engaging student teachers in active and dynamic learning processes.

Furthermore, the respondents shared their need for the STEP to fulfil their expectations of meaningfulness. They challenged the authorities (supervising teachers and teacher educators) to recognize and empower their full potential, which is in line with the findings by Wong and Wong (2007). They both admired and criticized the cultural habits in the programme. Their levels of trust in the relationships were in constant flux. The findings indicate that the respondents need to identify the authenticity (cf. Kreber 2013) of the activities in the teacher education. In addition, they perceived teaching as an interpersonal career and viewed the formation of good relationships with pupils and colleagues as the most important responsibility of teachers.

The student teachers involved in the study took an active role in challenging some of the traditions and cultural practices of their education. The results led to an interpretation of the core of teacher education as characterized by reciprocal participation created through the continuous interaction of the student teachers, supervising teachers, and teacher educators. Therefore, we suggest that the notion of social practice (Hedegaard et al. 1999) that builds on the connection between the practices of the programme and the social nature of the student teachers should be a driving force in the

design and implementation of teacher education programmes. This perspective is in profound contrast to the deficit view that has been applied to Millennials, which associates authenticity with narcissism and self-centeredness. Chickering et al. (2006) linked authenticity to caring and socially responsible practices, which seemed to be a common value among Millennials. Therefore, by considering these student teachers' initiatives and voices, it is possible to update initial teacher education programmes to support their professional development.

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